

## Incorporating sociocultural perspectives in practice

It is fair to say that understanding of a sociocultural perspective and what it means for practice is an ongoing, evolving challenge for early childhood communities on both sides of the Tasman as groups strive to deepen their appreciation of its meaning and possibilities. Recent research in one Australian early learning centre sought to identify how teachers could move from a predominantly individualistic developmental approach to more collective, mediated assessment based on an understanding of sociocultural theory (Fleer & Richardson, 2004a). Amongst other things, research findings revealed tensions emanating from the teachers' initial resistance to changing from well-established traditional approaches to how they began to focus on learning occurring in and supported by group contexts. Following the often difficult transition to a sociocultural approach to assessment, teachers expressed a renewed optimism for assessment strategies that they felt more clearly identified children's strengths and focused more purposefully on the supportive learning environments that they were able to plan for and in which they could also jointly participate.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, although *Te Whāriki* was widely embraced from its inception, it is only recently that pockets of practice have begun to reflect the theoretical insight that the original authors, Margaret Carr and Helen May, had in mind. In her research in four early childhood centres, Jordan (2004) found that through analysing and reflecting on their recorded interactions with children, the teachers realised that the scaffolding model they were frequently using promoted a power imbalance which, with their deepening insight into sociocultural practice within the framework of *Te Whāriki*, fell short of their expectations. As a result, the teachers shifted to a more co-constructivist approach. In practice, this involved them adjusting their perception of themselves as 'knowledgeable experts' in discussions with children to one in which shared meaning-making through conversation became paramount and assessment more collaborative.

Two studies (Fleer & Richardson, 2003; Jordan, 2004) highlight what has been noted elsewhere (e.g., Fleer & Richardson, 2004a), that turning to alternative educational paradigms, without the sound theoretical understandings that support such pedagogical decision-making is problematic, especially in a sector where having a full quota of well-qualified staff is still looked upon by many as a bonus rather than an imperative. It often leads to a superficial adoption of principles and practices that are



thought to support and enhance learning but in fact may undermine it. Approaches to assessment are contingent on the image of the child held by influential adults, a point too often overlooked by both policy-makers and teachers. Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that the dominant discourse in western education favours the view of the child as needy. This favours assessment and evaluation practices which privilege narrow, predetermined outcomes that are easily measurable and are aimed at pinpointing what is missing in a child's learning and development. The overriding motivation for assessment practice in this scenario is to establish 'what works' to ensure the highest return on investment. The same authors suggest that shifting to an image of the child as competent and confident demands a different type of assessment, one in which there is trust in children's inherent ability to learn. What then becomes of interest are the processes whereby children come to know and collaborate with others — both children and adults — around them. Unless early childhood professionals at all levels are prepared to acknowledge and engage with the implicit assumptions about the image of the child which sit behind assessment, the vision of leadership which we propose will remain elusive.

A notable area of on-going debate is whether the focus of analysis on the individual child can be subsumed under the umbrella of sociocultural assessment or not. In some quarters the feeling is that because learning is socially mediated, assessment that is considered significant enough to map through documentation should focus primarily on groups rather than individuals (Fleer, 2002; Fleer & Richardson, 2004b). Group observation allows teachers to document not just the context but also the relationships occurring between children and between children and teachers. Teachers themselves become an important part of the observation. However, these group observations can always be further analysed in order to find out more about each individual participant. Carr (2001) takes a rather different approach, maintaining that it is possible to set out to assess the individual while still maintaining a sociocultural lens. This occurs when teachers are alert to the many relational influences surrounding the child at the time and are then able to capture these through documentation. It also happens when the assessments are recorded in a manner that makes them interesting and accessible to a variety of audiences. In this way they 'act as a "conscription device" (a recruitment) for participants, establishing the membership of a social community of learners and teachers: children, families and the staff team' (Cowie & Carr, 2004, p. 95). When documented assessments 'conscript' others, they not only open up opportunities for diverse viewpoints on a child's interests and progress to be heard but they also become potential



sites for interaction and feedback; in other words for further socially-mediated learning. In practice, this view of sociocultural assessment requires teachers to rethink their position within the assessment equation. No longer are they the sole arbiter of a child's progress but rather the 'wise' facilitator of a team of assessors, which may include besides themselves, the child, parents and wider family members such as grandparents and siblings.

### An Australian example

Australian early childhood teachers have recently demonstrated a great interest in rethinking their approach to assessment of early learning (Fleer & Richardson, 2004b; Heath & Ryan, 2003; Horner & Topfer, 2003; Patterson & Fleet, 2003). A growing frustration with individually focused and decontextualised assessment tools, such as developmental checklists, has led to an interest in alternative assessment strategies that promise to illuminate authentic learning occurring in supportive and relationship-bound interactions. This re-conceptualisation of assessment has proven to be a complex, challenging and ultimately rewarding task for those faced with the reality of collecting assessment data and presenting it in meaningful ways to those most interested in children's learning and development (Fleer & Richardson, 2003, 2004b).

The Australian Government Department of Science, Education and Training (DEST) has also advocated a sociocultural approach to assessment. This can be seen in the Preschool Profile (DEST, 2001, 2003). The Preschool Profile uses the concept of scaffolding to document what children are able to do jointly and independently. It also maps when a concept is being modelled — thus foregrounding the role of the adult, or more capable peer, in the documentation process. The Preschool Profile provides a rich example of a sociocultural framework for gathering a series of child/group observations and making an overall assessment of particular children.

Recent interest in alternate paradigms for working with and understanding children, such as that emanating from Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy, has also contributed to the assessment debate by offering the possibility of new understandings of young children that reframe the work done by early childhood educators. Of foremost importance to the work undertaken in Reggio Emilia is the rich image of childhood that pervades educators' philosophical approach to teaching and learning. Their image of the child as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children'



(Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 10) enables a reconceptualisation of practice focused on relationships. It is an empowering vision that allows teachers to rethink, renew and re-evaluate the importance of their role in working with children because it both recognises and honours the agency of children and also implies a pedagogical imperative to value and plan for meaningful group interactions that support learning.

Documenting learning, so strongly advocated and deeply embedded in the pedagogical practice of Reggio Emilia (Project Zero & Reggio Children, 2001), has proven to be an integral component in the changing approach to assessment in Australia. Making learning visible through documentation provides strong and compelling evidence to families and the wider community alike of the value and significance of children's participation in meaningful learning experiences. It also provides tangible evidence for children of the learning in which they have participated. Children are able to revisit, reflect upon and rethink experiences in which they have made valuable contributions. Teachers can also use pedagogical documentation to reflect upon their own teaching practices. Documentation artefacts become valued resources for evaluation that support teachers to revisit and critically reflect upon their own participation as they interact with children to co-construct learning. Pedagogical documentation fits comfortably within a sociocultural approach to assessment because it offers the possibility of recording in meaningful ways the sociocultural processes involved in particular learning sequences. Recording personal, interpersonal and community/institutional information increases what can be understood about all participants (both children and teachers) being observed.

The following is an example of documented community learning that demonstrates how adopting a sociocultural approach can reveal detailed evidence of learning by focusing on the interactions between community members.

### **'A good idea'**

*A large writing table is laden with equipment. Pencils, Textas, scissors, gluesticks, staplers, paper and card are all assembled attractively in its centre. The room is softly lit by natural light and gentle music wafts lazily from the CD player.*

*Shawni and Levi are the first to arrive. Shawni collects bright yellow card and a handful of Textas. She sits down and immediately begins writing.*



She writes a long list of names. She tells me that she has copied some of the names from the lockers but the others are ones she 'can do by [her]self'. Levi sits next to her and he writes a few letters across the top of his piece of card. Shawni has drawn boxes around some of the words she has written and so does he. There is a small red sticker on the top right hand corner of his card and he draws a box around that too. Levi draws more boxes and soon has a grid design covering the whole surface of the page. He chooses more cardboard and then begins to tear it into small pieces. He twists and folds the pieces into a variety of shapes and then tells me that he has made a game and these are the 'players'. 'There are six players so six people can play this game.' The game has pirates and treasure and in discussing the rules with Levi I become aware of his expert knowledge about the genre of board games. 'Mum and I play them all the time at home.'

Ruby has settled in next to me and she expresses a desire to also make a game. She asks me to make it for her and I suggest that we make it together. Levi offers the possibility of dragons and forests as a theme for the game. Shawni suggests flying dragons. I trace an outline of a path across the page and ask Ruby if she thinks the path could be in the forest. She nods as she begins to draw the first of two detailed dragons.

Lara has been watching and has already drawn a grid pattern like Levi's and then co-opted Thomas and Kerrie, another teacher, to play her game. But there is a problem. Lara wants different players for her game. 'Something that stands up.' I cut out a circle, make an incision into the centre and then twist it into a cone shape. Ruby cuts a piece of sticky tape to secure the cone and then proceeds to ask me to help her make some for her game. I model the process and she assists with the sticky tape and holding the cone-shape while it is secured. Later she makes several others and also shows Alice how to make them.

Meanwhile, Liam, who has been watching and listening, has begun making his own game. He has borrowed ideas from Levi and Ruby and can already make the cone shaped players without help. He works with his friend Max to decorate the board game before moving off to play. Levi explains the rules of his game to another teacher who has recently arrived for the afternoon shift. She makes several new suggestions. How will the players know how many spaces to move? Perhaps the children could make a spinner? Or maybe they could flip a coin? Levi looks across to me and says, 'I had a good idea, didn't I? Now everyone is busy making games!'



This interaction was recorded and presented to children and families with accompanying photographs of the children and teachers as they worked together on a project of great mutual interest. Images of the finished board games completed the sequence. The interaction is significant on many levels. Foremost of these is the fact that the interactions occurring between the community members have become the focus for observation and record. The children can be seen to be absorbed in relevant and meaningful occupation alongside teachers who support and extend their investigation. The children also support each other. They make helpful suggestions and also borrow and share ideas as the project slowly unfolds. We can see them learning through direct interaction with their teacher, such as when Ruby learns how to make the cone shape with her teacher before making others independently and then progressing to demonstrating the same process to a friend. And we can also see them learning through careful peripheral participation and observation, as illustrated when Liam progresses to making his own game seemingly independent of the group processes that he has so carefully observed.

We also have a sense of the community and cultural knowledge that so powerfully pervade each child's experiences. Levi demonstrates great understanding of the conventions required to participate in board games. He knows about the playing board, the pieces, the game's ultimate objective and also the restrictions imposed by the number of pieces he has made. He relates this all to his own experience of playing games at home with his mother. This knowledge is embedded in his own cultural experiences. Further information about the culture of the learning environment is illuminated in the contextual information provided about the physical environment, the role the children have played in determining the project and the teachers' interactive and supportive role in co-constructing learning with children.

If this record were to be extended further then the following day's progress when several children brought in games from home to share with others at the centre would also be of significance. One child was seen to use the technique used to make the cone shaped board pieces to make hats for babies in the home corner. Both of these progressions demonstrate changing participation in community activity and as such provide evidence of learning and development from a sociocultural perspective. They also illustrate the relatedness between learning experiences that occur within supportive learning communities and suggest that observations of learning require extended investigation that encompass sequences of interaction that may occur over many days.



Rogoff (2003) contends that in order to analyse sociocultural activity we need to view activity through several foci of analysis that reveal personal, interpersonal and community/institutional information. This information was provided in the preceding observation. Focusing on any individual child is possible but done within the context of their interactions with others occurring within the learning community of which they are all integral members. This information enriches the observation by providing detailed evidence of the processes involved as children move 'through' understanding rather than 'to' understanding.

### An Aotearoa/New Zealand Example

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, 'Learning Stories' have been developed as an assessment tool that is increasingly attracting interest and generating enthusiasm amongst the early childhood community, a situation that probably reflects its origins within the sector itself. Learning Stories originated from research carried out by Dr Margaret Carr (1998) in response to the need for an assessment pathway that reflected the sociocultural intent embedded in the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki*, the Aotearoa/New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). Learning Stories differ from other qualitative but more clinical approaches to assessment in that they work within a true narrative genre. Cowie and Carr (2004, p. 97) describe them as 'structured narratives that track children's strengths and interests: they emphasise the aim of early childhood as the development of children's identities as competent learners in a range of arenas'. Aside from the story itself, the framework includes an analysis of the learning, and possibilities for how that learning might be deepened or extended. These are what turn a story into an assessment.

Like good stories in fiction, Learning Stories give attention to context and background but leave aside unnecessary detail in favour of what is significant and of interest (Hatherly & Sands, 2002). They also value interpretation that allows the reader to not only see that the protagonists are human beings but also that the person doing the 'watching' is a human being too. The strength of narrative, especially when it is documented, is that it draws attention to the way in which individual learning and development emerge through participation and relationships with 'people, places and things'. Although the focus of analysis in Learning Stories is often (but not always) the individual child, the narrative genre lends itself to making transparent the 'interpersonal' and 'cultural-institutional' processes relevant to the learning at the time.



Of course, the degree to which these are illuminated depends on teachers' understanding of and commitment to a 'transformation of participation' paradigm (Rogoff, 2003). Recognising the full potential of Learning Stories as a tool for sociocultural assessment is a continuing journey in itself for a sector which, as Cullen (2004, p. 73) points out, is still strongly influenced by an 'individualistic developmental tradition'. Accompanying this tradition has been an overriding emphasis in teacher education, professional development and practice, on treating assessment as a technical task in which the priority is refining the tools and systems to get it 'right' rather than examining the implications of sociocultural theory for assessment constructs and procedures. For example, concern over the use of the Learning Story forms (printed templates for recording stories) — when and which to use — often overshadows more in-depth discussion of how assessment processes are useful in strengthening relationships and fostering further learning.

Nonetheless, over the past six years as Learning Stories have evolved and developed in practice, a number of teachers have found that using a narrative genre also encourages participation in another way. As stories are accessible and more interesting to children and families than traditional methods of recording learning, they become an artefact of the 'transformation of participation' process themselves. As stories are read and reread and commented upon at the centre and within the family, both children and adults make sense of the material in new ways that make further contributions to the learning process. 'This is my story' becomes 'This is our story' and then 'This is a *story*' and these three elements are mutually affirming.

For example, in Bianca's portfolio there are a number of Learning Stories that track her developing interests and strengths in rocks and volcanoes and working the tools of technology. Contributing to the assessments are her teachers, her mother and her grandmother. Each story is accompanied by pictures, some of Bianca (aged 3) in action and others of important artefacts such as the rocks that she has brought from her grandmother's house. These pictures serve as important reference points when she comes to read her portfolio to others. As one reads through the portfolio it becomes clear that Bianca, with the support of her teachers, her family and other children at the centre is afforded many opportunities to practice some very valuable learning dispositions, including 'being curious', 'being persistent' 'being helpful to others' and 'being a leader'. The stories written by the teachers also make transparent their own reflections on what it means to be a 'good' teacher and what they regard as valued learning.



### *'Technological whiz'*

In the story 'Technological Whiz', Bianca comes across her teacher Elizabeth who is about to laminate some posters. She asks to help and with Elizabeth's support goes on to laminate all the posters. Elizabeth writes (to Bianca), 'Being a good teacher, I knew this was more about you than me and so with bated breath I let you laminate a poster from start to finish ...'. Later Elizabeth analyses the learning and reflects on the 'what next?'.

*Today Bianca showed an interest in the tools of technology. She wanted to know what the laminator was and how it worked. She showed great perseverance when presented with a problem and showed she was capable of asking for help and accepting help. Technological literacy is an important skill for learning in the future and something Bianca will use time and time again in her life ... As her early childhood teacher, it is my job to nurture this exploration and ... give her as much time and opportunity to develop this important learning skill ...*

This story prompted Bianca's mother to respond with:

*It is refreshing to know Bianca's incredible persistence and curiosity isn't something she reserves for only at home. We are always amazed at her tenacity to achieve whatever takes her fancy and 'no' merely means 'in a little while'!*

A subsequent story entitled 'Tech Teacher' recounts Bianca's ability to move from learner to teacher as, on her own initiative, she instructs a small group of children on how to use the laminator safely. (The teachers, having seen how interested and competent she was previously, now set up the laminator out of the office.) Further stories, written by another teacher, track Bianca's skill in working the centre's CD player and the teachers' support for this. Some months later Bianca becomes interested in rocks and volcanoes and this is also recorded over several stories. When she takes her portfolio (of Learning Stories) to show her grandmother who lives in another town, she returns with her grandmother's special volcanic rocks from Hawaii and a newspaper article about the volcano they came from. These artefacts become part of the centre's curriculum and Bianca once again has the opportunity to take on the role of teacher and leader as she shares her knowledge of the rocks with others, both children and adults. At this point, Bianca's mother writes another story in which she alludes to the further planning possibilities for her daughter's developing interests.